Midterm Climate Report: Partly Cloudy

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Body

The latest report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change made it clear that averting the worst consequences of climate changes (lesser consequences are by now all around us) will mean quickly cutting back on the use of fossil fuels that cause global warming.

Big Oil didn't get the memo.

Faced with what they saw as an existential threat to their businesses, BP, Valero, Phillips 66, the Koch brothers and other members of the fossil fuel fraternity dumped more than $30 million into Washington State to crush a ballot initiative that would have imposed the first taxes in the nation on carbon emissions. Backers of the proposal hoped it would serve as a template for similar action elsewhere and perhaps for the country as a whole. But the theoretical elegance of a carbon tax, which most economists and scientists believe is the surest way to control emissions on a broad scale, was no match even in reliably Democratic Washington for relentless fearmongering about job losses, higher electricity bills and more expensive gasoline.

The defeat in Washington was the most disappointing setback for climate activists in the midterm elections on Tuesday, a day of decidedly mixed messages on climate change in particular and environmental issues more broadly.

On the negative side of the ledger, the firewall in the Republican-majority Senate against any action at all on climate was fortified by assured Republican pickups in North Dakota, Indiana and Missouri. One new senator, Representative Kevin Cramer, who defeated Heidi Heitkamp in North Dakota, served as an energy adviser in the 2016 Trump campaign and was an architect of the president's energy agenda, which consists mainly of drilling oil and gas wells on just about every square inch of available federal land, onshore and off. If Rick Scott, the Republican Florida governor, maintains his narrow lead over Senator Bill Nelson, a Democrat, it will be another major loss for the environment. Governor Scott's administration for a time barred the use of the term "climate change" in official documents, and the governor was so inattentive to Florida's many climate-related risks, including sea level rise and flooding, that he was sued by a group of young people for ignoring the issue.

In Arizona, a ballot proposal that would have required utilities to get half their electricity from renewable sources by 2030 was soundly beaten after serious opposition from the state's biggest power company. More promisingly, Nevada voters approved a ballot measure that would require electric utilities to get 50 percent of their power from renewable sources like solar energy by 2030, up from around 25 percent today. But that proposal will have to be approved again in 2020.

The news was far better in the House of Representatives, which flipped to the Democrats, and even better in the statehouses, where one climate activist after another supplanted Republicans who didn't much care. The House

Science Committee is set to be led by Eddie Bernice Johnson of Texas, who actually cares about science, instead of the antediluvian Lamar Smith, another Texan, who used his chairmanship to harass climate scientists and beat the drum for oil-and-gas interests. The likely next chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee, Arizona's Raul Grijalva, is the polar opposite of Utah's Rob Bishop, the chairman and one of President Trump's main allies in the effort to rescind national monument designations as well as to open up public lands for extractive industries. New Jersey's Frank Pallone, expected to take charge of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, is far more concerned about climate change than any of the Republicans now on the panel.

In governors' races, Democratic candidates who worry about climate change did splendidly from Maine to New Mexico, replacing Republicans who were generally pro-fossil fuel. Several of Tuesday's winners have committed to a goal of 100 percent renewable energy in their states, including the newcomer Jared Polis in Colorado and the incumbent Kate Brown in Oregon. Several other newcomers — Gretchen Whitmer in Michigan, J.B. Pritzker in Illinois, Steve Sisolak in Nevada and Janet Mills in Maine — have promised to invest heavily in wind and solar power.

It is in people like these that the environmental community is now investing its hopes for near-term success, in part because governors with legislative majorities (Andrew Cuomo, take note) not only have a mandate to set ambitious targets for wind and solar power but also the wherewithal to persuade utilities to help meet those goals. And the impact could be considerable, especially if the states where Democrats picked up governorships commit themselves to the 26 percent to 28 percent reduction in greenhouse gases promised by President Barack Obama at the 2015 Paris summit on climate change.

Still, it is hard not to regret the loss of the carbon tax initiative in Washington State. Increases in renewable energy sources of the sort that the new governors are seeking can deliver big carbon reductions in the electric power sector and are important in what has to be a multifaceted attack on climate change. But greenhouse gas emissions from other sources, principally transportation, continue to rise, and one of the great attractions of a carbon tax is that it would provide a powerful incentive for consumers across all sectors of the economy to change their behavior and choose cleaner alternatives. For instance, a carbon tax that led to stiffer fuel taxes could encourage the market for electric cars, which are seen as essential to a low-carbon future.

Nobody thought the midterm elections were going to save the climate. And they didn't. What they did do was give the Democrats a chance to effect change on the state level — as well as the obligation and the power to hold the administration to account.

PHOTO: (PHOTOGRAPH BY Antonio Sortino FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

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